

81 Years Ago: Battle of Moscow, Soviet Counterattack

Part II

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Read Part I:



[History of World War II: 80 Years Ago, The Battle of Moscow](#)

By [Shane Quinn](#), October 21, 2021

As the Battle of Moscow began eight decades ago on 2 October 1941, the weeks directly preceding and following this date did not seem to augur well for the Soviet Army. Kiev, the USSR's third largest city, fell two weeks before on 19 September to a vast German pincers movement, and the Red Army lost a staggering 665,000 troops in the process.

Titled Operation Typhoon, the German plan for the capture of Moscow called for a two-stage battle. In the first phase German Army Group Centre, comprising of almost two million men (1), would execute a three-pronged attack; with the German 9th Army and Panzer Group 3 advancing to the north between the towns of Vyazma and Rzhev, both 140 miles west of Moscow.

The German 4th Army, and Panzer Group 4, would drive forward along the Roslavl-Moscow road in the centre; and Heinz Guderian's Panzer Group 2, now called the 2nd Panzer Army, would attack to the south between Bryansk and Orel to the city of Tula, 110 miles southward of Moscow. Operation Typhoon's second phase envisaged the final advance on the Russian capital, conducted by two armoured encircling thrusts from the north-west and the south-east.

The weather and terrain suited the Wehrmacht, for the time being. In the first three weeks of October 1941, the Germans captured another 663,000 Soviet soldiers and destroyed 1,200 tanks. Including casualties and prisoners taken, total Red Army losses in the opening stage of October amounted to a million troops (2). In a four week period from 19 September 1941, the Soviets had altogether lost more than 1.6 million men.

Even these terrible reverses did not prove insurmountable to a state whose populace, in 1941, amounted to around 193 million (3), as opposed to a population in Germany and Nazi-occupied Europe of about 110 million.

On 15 October 1941, Joseph Stalin ordered the majority of Soviet government officials to leave Moscow. They relocated 560 miles further east to the city of Kuibyshev on the Volga river. This indicates that the Soviet leadership was not confident that Moscow could be held. Stalin gloomily informed Harry Hopkins, president Franklin Roosevelt's personal emissary, that if Moscow was lost "all of Russia west of the Volga would have to be abandoned" (4). Nevertheless, Stalin remained in Moscow, believing that his continued presence there would maintain morale and prevent widespread unrest among Muscovites, clearly the correct decision.

While the Wehrmacht closed on Moscow, the Red Army's resistance appeared to be weakening. On 19 October 1941 the Germans took the abandoned town of Mozhaysk, 65 miles west of Moscow. The following day, Stalin declared martial law as the capital was placed under full military control.



Red Army ski troops in Moscow. Still from documentary [Moscow Strikes Back](#), 1942 (Licensed under CC0)

On 23 October 1941 the Germans crossed the Narva river, and were only 40 miles from Moscow (5). During the next day, however, the famous Russian rainfall (rasputitsa) arrived almost providentially. The Germans were expecting rains to come but the ferocity of it was a

shock to them. The unpaved roads and paths quickly turned into rivers of thick, congealed mud. This meant that no wheeled vehicle could move for consecutive days, and the larger panzers advanced at a snail's pace. The wider-tracked Russian T-34 tanks were more suited to such conditions.

British scholar Evan Mawdsley wrote,

"The defence of Moscow was certainly helped by changes in the weather" and "Unlike the Germans, the Russians had a working railway system behind their front line. Soviet planes were operating from prepared airfields, while the Luftwaffe now had to make do with improvised muddy landing strips". (6)

By 24 October 1941 as the rains came, the German invasion was four months old (17 weeks) and in serious difficulty. Adolf Hitler had previously expected to conquer the Soviet Union in less than half of that time (8 weeks). When France collapsed the Nazi leader told his military advisers Wilhelm Keitel and Alfred Jodl that "a campaign against Russia would be child's play" (7). Field Marshal Keitel, often accused of being a lackey, disagreed and he was opposed to attacking the USSR.

The German High Command (OKH) predicted in mid-December 1940 that "the Soviet Union would be defeated in a campaign not exceeding 8-10 weeks". Such views were strongly shared by the American and British authorities. Why did these predictions prove so wrong?

We can get to the heart of the matter, by briefly examining German blunders regarding grand strategy and, with it, the most important reason: Hitler's directive of 21 August 1941, that led to a crucial six week postponement in the march on Moscow (21 August-2 October). This came against the wishes of the Wehrmacht's leadership, who desperately wanted the advance towards Moscow to continue. By the last week of August, Army Group Centre was 185 miles from Moscow, not a great distance by any means. (8)

The capital city was the USSR's most important metropolis, its power centre and communications line (9). Had it fallen in the autumn of 1941, the repercussions would most probably have been fatal for the Soviets.

English historian Andrew Roberts observed, "Moscow was the nodal point of Russia's north-south transport hub, was the administrative and political capital, was vital for Russian morale and was an important industrial centre in its own right" (10). As a transportation and administrative hub, Moscow performed a central role in the Red Army's ability to supply other parts of its front. On 21 August 1941 at his Wolfsschanze headquarters in the East Prussian forests, Hitler put aside one critical objective (Moscow), and substituted it with five targets of lesser importance.

Hitler expounded that they would instead pursue "the capture of the Crimea" and "the industrial and coal mining area of the Donets" along with "the cutting off of Russian oil supplies from the Caucasus" and "the investment of Leningrad and the linking up with the Finns". When on 22 August Hitler's orders were forwarded to Field Marshal Fedor von Bock, commanding Army Group Centre and a very experienced officer, he telephoned General Franz Halder and said it was "unfortunate, above all because it placed the attack to the east in question... I want to smash the enemy army and the bulk of this army is opposite my front!" (11)

Von Bock, a monarchist who did not like the Nazis, continued that diverting forces away from the attack on Moscow “will jeopardize the execution of the main operation, namely the destruction of the Russian armed forces before winter”. Halder, a key planner in Operation Barbarossa’s original design, agreed with him. Two days later on 24 August 1941 von Bock reiterated, “They apparently do not wish to exploit under any circumstances the opportunity decisively to defeat the Russians before winter!” (12)

One can note the normally dour von Bock’s use of exclamation marks, as he believes the chance for victory has been taken away from him. Insult was added to injury, as von Bock was compelled to release four of his five panzer corps, and three infantry corps, for the southward and northwards assaults on the Ukraine and Leningrad. Halder felt that Hitler’s directive of 21 August “was decisive to the outcome of this campaign”. (13)

For reasons of megalomania, Hitler had overruled his military commanders on a pivotal military issue. American historians Samuel W. Mitcham and Gene Mueller summarised that Hitler’s 21 August directive “was one of the greatest mistakes of the war” (14). It came on top of the opening strategic errors of 22 June 1941, when the Wehrmacht attacked all of the western USSR simultaneously, ultimately weakening the Nazi blow. Fortunately, the Third Reich’s leadership was strategically inept.

In late August 1941, the German Armed Forces High Command (OKW) were contemplating that the war in the east would drag on until 1942 (15). An early knockout strike had not materialised, and the Soviet Army was fighting with tenacity; while the Russians possessed military hardware of a high standard, like the Katyusha rocket launcher (Stalin’s Organ) and the T-34 tank, which came as a real surprise to the Germans. (16)

An OKW memorandum from 27 August ran, “if it proves impossible to realise this objective completely [the USSR’s destruction] during 1941, the continuation of the eastern campaign has top priority for 1942” (17). Hitler approved the memo, which suggests that he was starting to think the invasion may not be successfully concluded in 1941. Hitler certainly believed this by November of that year.

The Soviet cause was given a major lift when, on 10 October 1941, Stalin officially granted General Georgy Zhukov the leadership over the majority of Red Army divisions (the Western Front and Reserve Front) for the capital’s defence. The 44-year-old Zhukov was an extremely able, energetic, self-confident and ruthless commander, just the sort of man that was needed.

Zhukov pursued a policy of initiating incessant counterattacks, and then withdrawing at the final moment. These tactics succeeded in wearing down the belated German march on Moscow (18). More than any other soldier in the war, Zhukov would play a leading part in the Nazis’ demise. Andrei Gromyko, a prominent Soviet diplomat, wrote that Zhukov was “the jewel in the crown of the Soviet people’s greatest victory”. (19)

At the beginning of November 1941 victory was not yet assured, for the rains disappeared and frost set in. The ground had hardened enough for the panzers to begin rolling again. These colder temperatures were uncomfortable for the German troops, who incredibly were still not supplied with sufficient winter clothing, but the temperature hovered around zero for now and was not unbearable.

In preceding weeks, the Kremlin received intelligence reports from their spy in Tokyo, Dr.

Richard Sorge, and also from Soviet agencies, which stated that Imperial Japan was not preparing an immediate attack on the eastern USSR. This time Stalin believed the intelligence accounts and, in the first fortnight of November 1941, he transferred 21 fresh divisions from Siberia and Central Asia to the Moscow front. (20)

The Germans had no such reserve of men to call upon. On the night of 11 November 1941, the temperature dropped suddenly to minus 20 degrees Celsius. Frostbite cases were becoming common among German soldiers, but the Wehrmacht resumed advancing from 15 November. A week later, on 22 November the medieval town of Klin fell, 52 miles north-west of Moscow. (21)

The following day, Panzer Group 4 took Solnechnogorsk, 38 miles from Moscow. On 27 November the 7th Panzer Division established a bridgehead across the Moscow-Volga Canal. Also during 27 November, the 2nd SS Panzer Division Das Reich captured the town of Istra, just 31 miles west of Moscow.

German professor Jörg Ganzenmüller wrote that Hitler now formulated “a special order”, which was sent to SS major Otto Skorzeny of the Das Reich division. Hitler demanded that Skorzeny and his men occupy the locks of the reservoir on the Moscow-Volga canal, and then open the locks so as to “drown” Moscow by turning it into a massive artificial lake (22). These orders were obviously never carried out, due to Skorzeny’s unit being unable to advance much further.

In late November 1941, it was apparent that the German offensive would likely fail. As of 26 November, the Germans had lost 743,112 men on the Eastern front (23). This number does not include frostbite casualties and other soldiers absent due to illness.

Because of ongoing Russian resistance and their fresh resources – which in both cases had been much greater than the Germans anticipated – General Guderian’s panzers had failed to reach the city of Tula, just over 100 miles south of Moscow. Panzer Group 3, which captured the line of the Moscow-Volga Canal on 28 November, could attack no further; and while a division from Panzer Group 4 had proceeded to within 18 miles of Moscow, continued progress for them proved impossible.

On 2 December 1941, a motorcycle reconnaissance unit of the 2nd Panzer Division reached the suburb of Khimki, five miles from Moscow and nine miles from the Kremlin. Isolated, it did not remain for long in this forward position (24). That was as close as the Germans ever got to the spires of Moscow.

On the night of 4 December, the temperature plummeted again to minus 31 degrees Celsius. Twenty four hours later, it sank to minus 36 degrees (25). It was clear that Operation Barbarossa had failed and worse was in store for the Germans. If they could not accomplish the USSR’s overthrow in 1941, they could hardly expect to do so in a weaker condition in 1942.

The writing was on the wall on 5 December 1941, as the Soviet Army counterattacked the static and precariously positioned Germans, by striking Panzer Group 3 near the Moscow-Volga Canal, along with the German 9th Army at the city of Kalinin. The next day, 6 December, General Zhukov’s divisions launched an assault on the 2nd Panzer Army south of Moscow, with both sides suffering serious losses. Yet Zhukov prevailed by forcing the 2nd Panzer Army to retreat over 50 miles.

Field Marshal von Bock, irate at these setbacks, wrote in his diary, "Last August, the road to Moscow was open; we could have entered the Bolshevik capital in triumph and in summery weather. The high military leadership of the Fatherland made a terrible mistake, when it forced my Army Group to adopt a position of defence last August. Now all of us are paying for that mistake". (26)

In winter weather, the Soviets were a superior fighting force in comparison to the enemy. Soviet divisions were better equipped and had much more experience of adverse conditions. Stalin said shortly after the Red Army subdued Finland in March 1940, "It is not true that the army's fighting capacity decreases in wintertime. All the Russian Army's major victories were won in wintertime... We are a northern country". (27)

With the Soviets continually counterattacking, one must give the Germans substantial credit for managing somehow to avoid a total collapse, which is what had befallen Napoleon's army in Russia in late 1812. Hitler refused to allow a general retreat, as he ordered on 16 December 1941 that each German soldier display "fanatical resistance".

By the end of December 1941, the Russians had advanced 100 to 150 miles across a broad front (28). The Red Army did not achieve a truly decisive breakthrough and the fighting would continue into 1942, and indeed well beyond that.

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Notes

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